

WASHINGTON -- A federal commission said Tuesday that North Korean refugees suspected of meeting with religious groups are often marked for harsh interrogation, torture and long detentions without trial after they are forced by China to return to the North.

A report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom called for nations to press China to stop sending North Korean refugees back to their homeland. The commission was created in 1998 to monitor religious freedom around the world and make policy recommendations.

The report comes as Beijing tries to burnish its international reputation by hosting the Summer Olympic Games. China already faces pressure for its crackdown on anti-Beijing protesters in Tibet and for what critics say is Beijing's refusal to do more to influence the Sudan government to stop violence in its Darfur region.

Negotiators from six nations, including China and the U.S., are working to settle differences that have stalled North Korean nuclear disarmament talks. The report said that an "understandable focus on nuclear security should not diminish diplomatic efforts to also address human security in North Korea."

The report is based on interviews with 32 refugees who fled North Korea to China from 2003 to 2007 and with six former North Korean security agents who defected to South Korea during the past eight years.

Interviews with the former security agents, the report said, showed that mistreatment of "anyone suspected of conducting clandestine religious activity in North Korea is an officially approved policy and, thus, likely to continue, particularly as cross-border contact with China increases."

The report found that, despite repression and antireligion propaganda, "remnants" of traditional folk beliefs, Buddhism and Christianity continue in the North.

But, it said, Christianity and Buddhism have been thoroughly repressed and “reduced largely to clandestine worship at what are largely religious tourist attractions.”

One refugee told the researchers that although freedom of religion is guaranteed by law, “in reality, it is considered as a threat to the system, a hotbed of security problems, and opium” of the people.